

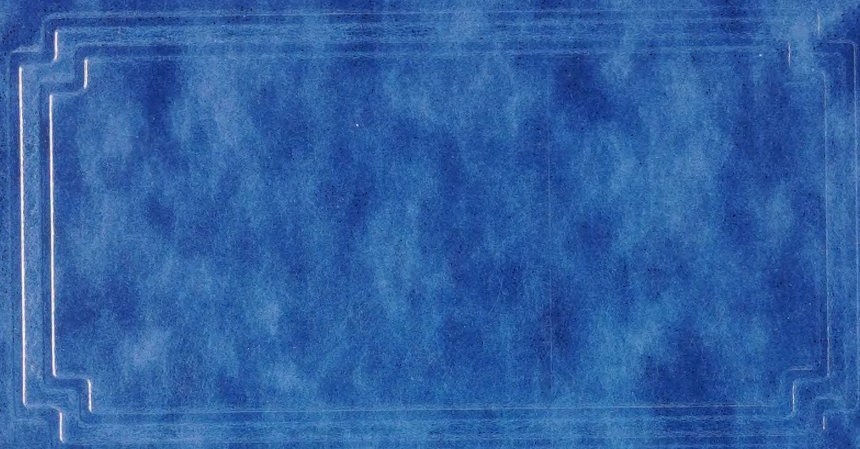
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Vancouver Bach Choir



Government
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FEDERAL CULTURAL POLICY REVIEW COMMITTEE

BRIEF

SUBMITTED ON BEHALF OF THE VANCOUVER BACH CHOIR

To the Review Committee:

This Brief is submitted on behalf of the Vancouver Bach Choir. The Choir was founded 50 years ago, and is the largest permanent amateur choir in Western Canada. Rather than take further space to describe the Choir and its activities, we attach a publication which was issued last summer to mark our 50th Anniversary.

We have made the initial decision to discuss the issues raised in the publication "Speaking of our Culture" from the direct perspective of the Choir, and choral activity in Canada, rather than to pursue a more general discussion of arts and cultural policy in Canada. We believe we have some information and insights to offer from our own specific if somewhat narrow experience; the broader perspective is more properly the mandate of the Review Committee when it comes to consider the wider spectrum of specific concerns.

We will start by addressing the questions which you have suggested, and will conclude with some comments of our own.

Culture: In or of Canada ?

This heading, and the questions associated with it, raise some interesting but not vital problems. In the area of program, i.e. the choral literature, the major choral works for large choirs have a religious background. A few were composed for state occasions. There is also of course a considerable body of non-religious choral music. Notwithstanding the presence of this largely "foreign" classical literature, there is certainly some current Canadian choral composition, and there is no reluctance on the part of Canadian Choirs to venture into these modern compositions. We have, for 5730 Seaview Road, West Vancouver, B.C. V7W 1P8 • Telephone 921-8012

instance, jsut completed the premiere recording of "Green, White, Blue" by Harry Freedman, and have often performed other Canadian works. We find no difficulty in reconciling the existing repertoire with new composition, whether Canadian or not, and the present balance appears satisfactory. We would support government assistance in commissioning new works, since that does appear to be a necessary precondition for their creation.

We have had some difficulties with the citizenship requirements for performers. There has been some pressure by government (no doubt in reaction to pressure from other sources) to prefer or require Canadian citizenship for our conductors or directors. This may, on occasion, deprive us of the opportunity to engage the better person, in the abstract sense. However, it would be presumptuous to suggest that a group of 140 persons have a clear consensus on this point. Most people accept the preference until it runs contrary to their particular situation, and then plead for an exception.

The other aspect of citizenship relates to soloists. Since many of the larger formal choral works require three to five soloists, the question of fees is ever present. In general, we would be happy to encourage Canadian singers, and have do so on many occasions. However, we are sometimes faced with the problem of seeking a "name" who will ensure a healthy audience, and find it difficult if restricted to Canadian artists alone. On other occasions, we find that the Canadian "names" are sometimes very expensive in comparison to equivalent artists from other countries--and the Canadians are often located just as far away. There is probably no easy or logical answer to these problems. The main concern is that any "political" principle of preference should be tempered by common sense and a spirit of accommodation. If the presence of one non-Canadian soloist enables 140 Canadian choristers to put on a concert, that does not seem a bad trade-off for Canada.

Culture: National and Regional :

Fortunately, there is nothing particularly regional about choral singing. The regional concern only arises for us if we think that our "region" has not received its appropriate amount of support. Our choir is clearly a Canadian choir when it is singing in Holland, Poland or France (as it has in recent years) but perhaps it is a western or West Coast choir when in Eastern

Canada.

It does seem to us that there is a presumption in favour of distributing support for choral work roughly in proportion to population, since there are a large number of local choirs spread across the country. There are a few choirs which would like to think of themselves as "national" and as such entitled to particular support, but on the whole we support a regional approach. The "national" choirs can be more rationally supported on an amateur-professional distinction, as discussed later. There is bound to be some tension between the twin desiderata of creating as much participation as possible, and supporting and encouraging top-level performance in a few locations. Of course, in a perfect world, both could be supported; in this less than perfect world we will have to accept a compromise between the two. Different forms of support are appropriate; the large choirs require travel and professional direction; the smaller or the less professional choirs require educational and space facilities, and may be supported sufficiently by regional or municipal agencies. The large or small "professional" choirs will derive some support from C.B.C. or other similar engagements.

Excellence and Access

Here again, we are caught between encouraging many to participate, or a few to participate at a high level. To a considerable extent, we find that the Canadian school system is remiss in failing to support or develop music as a subject in its own right. Our recruits tend to come from immigrants who have a choral tradition in their home country, from those with a church background, or from music students. We cannot sufficiently emphasize the crying need for more music training in the school system.

Given this lack of encouragement for younger singers, some government support for choirs of all types is required. Here there is no dichotomy between performer and public access, since for choirs all training is for performance. It must be admitted that choral music may appeal to a fairly distinct and not proportionately large or general audience, but we feel fully justified in arguing that the choral audience in this province has expanded very considerably in the last few years, in direct proportion to the number of qualified choirs which are now performing.

So far as a "popular touring repertoire" is concerned, there is no


particular problem for choirs. We have never had difficulties in finding audiences when on tour, nor was it necessary to change the form of program, except that we are restricted to unaccompanied music or the use of a piano or organ. Often there will be a local orchestra or players who will be available. Thus there is no particular difficulty in touring, so far as a different type of program is concerned, and indeed the production costs, save for the travel itself, are often lower.

The Amateur-Professional Continuum:

As you say, "the major tilt of federal cultural policies has been toward professionalism". This does hurt choral groups, since almost all are composed of amateurs, with some professional direction. In our own case, we have 140 amateurs, a professional conductor and associate conductor, a professional manager, and a professional accompanist. For the purposes of the Canada Council, we appear to have achieved a "semi-professional" status, and our professionals are thus supported to some extent. There are a very few professional choirs in Canada; they are small, and may form the nucleus of a larger amateur choir. If the Canadian public is to have the benefit of performances by a large choir (which is required for several major works in the choral repertoire) then by definition the majority of the choir will be amateurs, and the choir will need support if only to support its professionals. These professionals are supported as direct employees of the choir, or as orchestras engaged by the choir. An arbitrary rejection of choral support on the basis of amateur status seems unfair and also fails to recognize the peculiar nature of the large choir, which has always been and will always be an amateur organization, but performing with and employing professionals. In what other artistic activity can a modest amount of government support gain, by leverage, the unpaid artistic services of more than 100 "amateurs"?

In answer to your specific questions, we support government funding of amateur activities, and we do not feel that this should be exclusively a provincial responsibility. It will not be at the "expense" of other professional support, since its net effect is to support other professionals.

Finally, present criteria for international touring support should very definitely be enlarged to include amateurs, at least those in our rather



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peculiar position. Perhaps the same result could be accomplished by rating certain choirs as professional, but that does some violence to the definition. By whatever means, the large choirs should not be barred from national or international travel by the application to them of unrealistic rules. The amateur-professional dichotomy cannot apply to choirs, at least at a certain level of performance.

Cultural Economics:

Support of choral performance cannot be classified neatly as either demand or supply-side support. Various forms of subsidy make it possible for a choir to put on a concert with ticket prices which are less than would be required otherwise--in some cases, up to 50% less. To that extent, the support now available appears to be supply-side, but is in reality demand-side. It is the ticket purchaser who really receives the subsidy; the choir keeps no money but is able to pay some of the expenses. It is probably not realistic to expect ticket prices to rise to the "true" costs for this form of performance since the numbers of performers involved (especially where there is an orchestra as well) are so great. You have mentioned a concern over a choice between Canadian and other available events, but in the choral field there is no real competition, at least for live performances. There may be some such competition when we get to recorded performances, but that is discussed below.

There is one aspect of cultural economics which does very much concern us, and that is the effect which support to one applicant affects a dependant applicant. To put this in precise terms, a symphony orchestra now depends heavily on various types of support. In turn, it is, or is not, able to engage soloists or other performers who are themselves applicants. Until recently, we existed as a symphonic choir, largely dependant upon annual engagements by the Vancouver Symphony to cover our annual expenses. For good reasons or bad, the Symphony has now concluded that it will not present major choral works and so we are now in the position of hiring the Symphony and taking the financial risks of the concert, which assists them. This reversal of roles makes our dependance on government support greater than before. We are not aware if the inter-relation between the two applicants is considered by granting bodies.

Federal Cultural Agencies:

Only two of the ten listed agencies have any real involvement with choirs-- the Canada Council and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. There does not appear to be any inconsistency or problem caused by these two sources of potential funding. The Canada Council makes a grant which permits us to continue the employment of professional direction and management. The C.B.C. engages us from time to time for a specific concert or broadcast. In one sense, the Canada Council is supporting the C.B.C. by making it possible to exist as an available source of program; in another, the C.B.C. enables the Canada Council to provide less funding and acts as a check on the quality of our performance. The relationship is symbiotic and beneficial. The genuine concerns which you raise fortunately do not complicate the choral field.

Funding the Arts:

We think the present variety in funding sources is probably a good thing. A single source would exercise the power of life or death and the recipient would be tempted to tailor its efforts purely to fit the grant application and its perception of the priorities of the granting body, rather than the artistic challenge which should be met. Further, there is no good reason why either the provincial or the federal government-- or municipal governments should be exempt from responsibility for artistic support. Each has its tax base; each has its interests ; each has its constituency. Organizations such as ours must work on a long-term timetable; we have to plan two to three years ahead in order to arrange theatres and soloists and prepare the repertoire. If we were subject to the ups and downs of budgets of single granting agencies, this rational planning would be difficult; we could not maintain the continuity of membership or effort which is required. In addition, there are always individual special projects which appeal to particular donors, and so multiple granting agencies provide some flexibility. Further, granting bodies tend to regard more seriously those applicants who demonstrate at least enough initiative to seek a variety of sources of support, rather than relying upon the universal donor.

We are, however, somewhat concerned about the problem which arises when each donor waits to see what the others have given. This does not encourage the first donor to be generous, and no doubt there is room for political manipulation. We cannot and do not object to full disclosure of financial statements, but we do object to providing each donor with budgets which estimate what will

be received from the others, since the low estimate becomes the self-fulfilling prophecy.

As for the private sector, it is contributing indirectly through the tax base and directly through donations (with a tax benefit). Perhaps it should be the private sector, rather than the applicant, which should comment on the preferable form of support. However, if a corporate or even private donor wishes the sense of involvement which a private donation provides, that form of cultural support may be more palatable and in the long run more productive. The danger is that such support is sometimes given with advertising in mind and may result in productions which are more directed at showy appeal rather than intrinsic artistic merit. A reasonable blend of both forms of support would seem advisable.

The Old and the New

Choral music only exists if it is performed. There is a rich heritage, and presently quite a limited Canadian choral literature. New writing should be encouraged, but the existing material must be practiced and performed if choirs are to provide Canadians with both the world and the local heritage. Like most other Canadian solutions, a reasonable compromise must be struck between creation and preservation. The present balance is not out of line.

Types of Culture:

Choral singing is a mixture of professional culture and community culture; there is occasionally an additional bit of commercial culture when a film is made or a record cut. The only major television feature which we have produced was made by an American station since we were not able to interest any Canadian producer. However, the C.B.C. is presently completing a record; the economics of that venture are not known to us.

As for Canadian content, it does not appear to be a burning issue, and it would be presumptuous to try to indicate the opinions of 140 singers. Since the C.B.C. is the only station which "tapes" our concerts, it is the only available radio source for broadcasts. It is not likely that there is a strong majority demand among listeners for such programming, as against "popular" programs, but the great virtue of the C.B.C. is that it does offer "minority" forms of program which could not be supported by a purely commercial station. That is its virtue and its mandate, and it should be protected in performing that valuable service. It may not be realistic to force a Canadian-content

onto commercial radio or television but in a country of this size and this population, the significant but thinly-spread audience for choral music needs the C.B.C. and the Canada Council in just the same way as the commercial world needs the railways, to hold the country together and permit the stretched minorities to hand onto each other's hands.

Special Considerations for Choral Groups:

Choirs have always required some form of patron. Of course the original patron was the Church; later, royalty and rich patrons were added. Since performances were free, someone had to supply the location, the music, the orchestra, and the conductor. The governments and the large corporations now perform the roles of patron, and the schools should (but do not) perform the training function formerly carried on by the Church.

Now that performances are no longer free, and the Church plays a diminished role in both creation and support of music, the training of a choir and the performance of choral works (often with soloists) is beyond the means of a group of amateurs, and audience support cannot quite meet the need. Therefore some form of aid has become necessary and to some extent accepted. The present difficulties are perceived to arise chiefly from the amateur-professional distinction which we argue is improperly applied to us. In general, we would urge more support for choir directors, in their efforts to educate and direct more amateurs. We would also appreciate more influence and assistance directed at the schools and their music programs. We realize that education is reserved to the provinces under the present constitutional arrangements, but financial assistance can sometimes be offered without treading on constitutional toes.

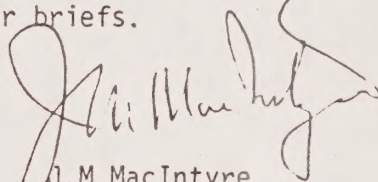
Final Comment:

We realize that this brief may appear narrowly centred on the particular concerts of a large choir, and not very responsive to the larger issues of cultural support in Canada. We felt, however, that you might find particular "grass-roots" examples or comments of somewhat more use than the rather vague generalizations which a very large group might agree upon, to forward to you.

It is also only fair to state that the writer has tried to convey his best impression of a majority view. The brief has not been circulated for approval among the choir, due to the recent problems caused by the civic strike which

necessitated moving from the 2800-seat Orpheum Theatre to the 800-seat Christ Church. That has imposed an unusually heavy burden upon the choir and upon Board members and I have not been able to consult that Board as much as I would have liked. I have therefore composed this brief in some haste just after that concert(before counting the loss).

If the Committee wishes any amplification or explanation of this Brief, or of matters raised or omitted in it, I am sure that members of the Board of Directors would be pleased to answer them, either in written form or by participation in the hearings. I wish to thank the Committee for this opportunity to respond to the call for briefs.



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